

BOSTON COMMON
AND
STATE HOUSE APPROACHES

1917

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DEVELOPMENT OF
THE EASTERLY PORTION OF
BOSTON COMMON IN RELATION
TO THE STATE HOUSE
APPROACHES

BY ARTHUR A. SHURTLEFF,
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Arthur G. Sauraliff
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THE STATE HOUSE AT BOSTON

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EASTERLY PORTION OF BOSTON COMMON IN RELATION TO THE STATE HOUSE APPROACHES

BY ARTHUR A. SHURTLEFF, Landscape Architect

A moderate camouflage of trees is often desired, even in times of peace, to hide an ugly public edifice and in some degree to obscure its avenues of approach. To divert the attention of passersby from a displeasing object in this way is justifiable though there is humor in the device which cannot be overlooked. This kind of obscuration, sometimes intentional, but more often the result of accident, has been used with success here and there over much of the country to relieve irritating effects of ugliness. Unfortunately, this primitive method of relief has been widely misapplied to buildings of unusual beauty from which no one would wish to turn his gaze. The extent to which pleasing structures have been hidden by this kind of obliteration is well understood by those who have attempted, in fact or in imagination, to part the branches of misplaced trees and to shift the position of badly located buildings in order to reveal noble edifices which have been lost to sight.

Everyone brings to mind simple churches and modest town halls in the countryside which are lost to sight behind banks of foliage. The offending trees were planted in the old days to relieve an appearance of bareness or to give shade, but without thought of the total eclipse of the building which the screen of branches and leaves would bring about in years to come. One remembers here and there an admirable City Hall or first-rate Capitol which, for no offense, has been "planted out" so effectively with trees and hidden with buildings to such an extent that it has become nearly invisible and to that degree difficult of approach. No one would wish to remove all the trees from these edifices and leave them bare without a background or without a frame of foliage; no one would wish to remove the houses against which they silhouette, or the flanking rows of minor buildings which lead up to the great structures. The trees and buildings which offend are those which stand in the way of the best line of sight, which blot out the spire or the dome, which interrupt the colonnade of the entrance, and the arcades of the great doors. Evidently a careful decision must be

made to determine the best line of sight to be opened in order that substantial backgrounds and flanking masses may be left to form a satisfactory composition. To denude the site and its approaches in an attempt to secure prospects from all sides would defeat the very objects for which a composition is sought. Objects which confuse the system of paths and roads leading to the edifice, and seem to make the approach difficult or eccentric, should be eliminated. Objects which lead the eye and the attention to the building, making it the center of a satisfactory composition, should be retained. Evidently an arrangement of trees, flanking structures, and approaches which are satisfactory for one edifice and site, might be wholly inappropriate or inconvenient for another building and its surroundings. The opportunities and novelties of each site should be seized to avoid the danger of repeating a stereotyped pattern. In all problems, the aim should be to secure appropriate visibility and convenient approach. These are important functions of a noble public building. Visibility justifies and rewards labor wisely spent to secure a structure of good appearance; ease of approach justifies and rewards the labor and cost of securing an adequate site.

The reader will recall the efforts which are being made in the City of Washington to reclaim the territory lying in the line of site between the Capitol and the Potomac River. The condition in which this site was found when the Government Commission took it in hand is typical of the state of the ground before many of our public buildings. The territory was clogged with trees, criss-crossed with unrelated paths and roads, dotted with incongruous buildings, and crossed by a railroad. By the merest chance the comprehensive scheme which had been worked out a century before for the development of this district was brought to light. The Government Commission proposes to return to the original plan by removing the medley of trees in the center of the scheme, replacing them with an open space of grass bordered by widely parted rows of trees, which are to be backed up by rows of Government buildings. This great Mall is to form more than a mere decorative feature revealing the dome of the Capitol. The Mall will include the system of drives and paths which are to lead from the proposed Potomac bridge to the Capitol and which are to connect the buildings flanking the entire group of edifices. In other words, the scheme for revealing the Capitol building to the eye is an organic part of a scheme of approaches.



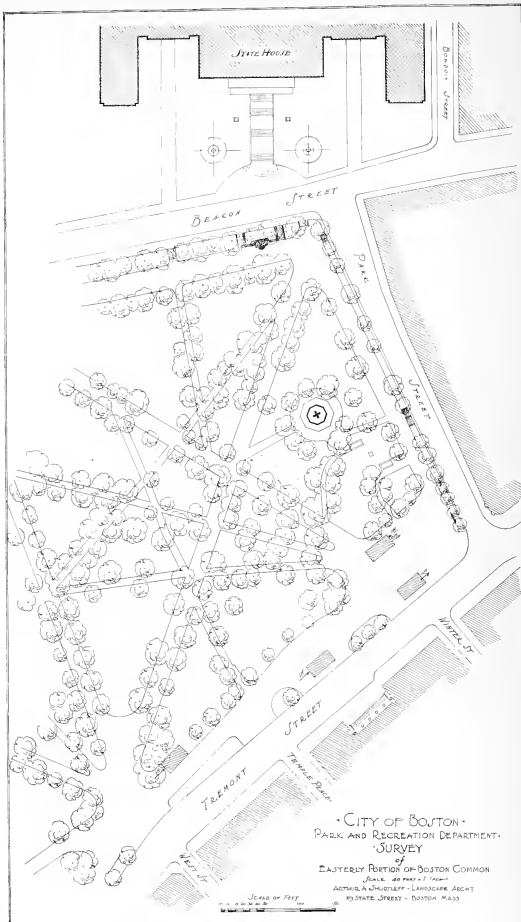


PLATE I

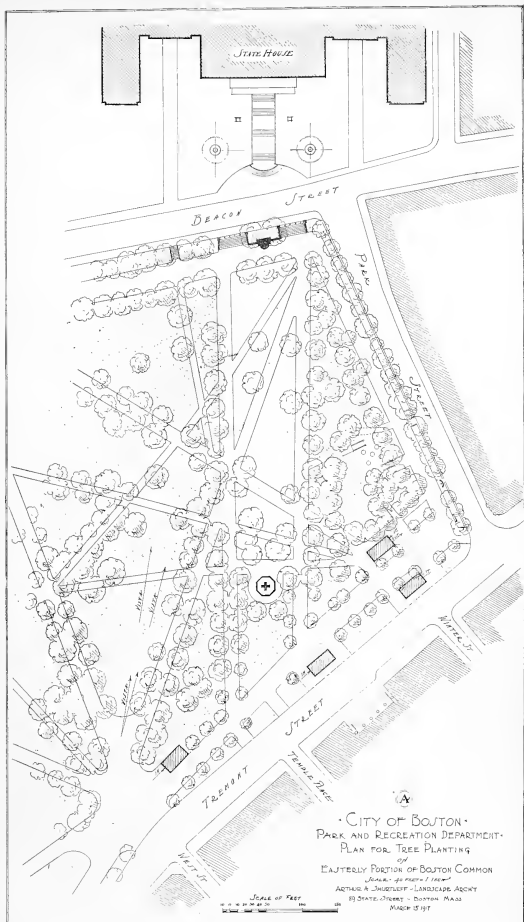


PLATE II



PLATE III. STATE HOUSE DURING DEMOLITION OF OBSTRUCTING DWELLINGS



PLATE IV. STATE HOUSE BEFORE REMOVAL OF UNDESIRABLE TREES

When one considers for how long a time we allowed our National Capitol to suffer for want of the most obviously needed development of its foreground, there is little wonder that a widespread neglect of the surroundings and approaches of public edifices of the country as a whole should have prevailed. In fact all our cities and towns were awakened by the discussion of the great opportunities so long neglected and forgotten, and so nearly lost at Washington. The following account of the development of the approaches to the Massachusetts Capitol building over the easterly portion of Boston Common illustrates on a much smaller scale, a somewhat similar problem which is now in hand and which has been in large measure carried to completion. To the degree in which the work about this State Capitol is typical of similar problems in other parts of the country, a description of it will doubtless interest readers of this magazine.

Briefly stated, the work done on Boston Common consisted in removing a swath of the irregularly planted trees in front of the State House, in constructing two marginal walks flanking the edges of this opening, in planting rows of trees on the outer edges of these walks, in relocating the Brewer Fountain on the axis of the Capitol, and in the radical widening of the narrow steps on each side of the Shaw Memorial. The work remaining to be done includes the elimination of certain unnecessary paths, the reduction in height of the subway stations, and the installation of certain planting areas along the broad expanse of the Tremont Street Mall to control the course of foot traffic and to furnish soil for the growth of trees to give shade. For those who wish to know more of the details of this problem, the following account may be of interest. The work is being done by the Boston Park & Recreation Department* from plans prepared by the author in consultation with the State House Architects, the City Planning Board, the Art Commission, and the Boston Common Society.

The frontispiece shows the State House in Boston as seen along the vista of Park Street. For generations, this diagonal glimpse has been the only satisfactory view which could be enjoyed of this remarkable monument except from the upper windows of nearby office buildings. In the days when the Common was used as a cow pasture, many equally impressive views of the dome and colonnade were to be had from the open

*The present and past members of the Commission who have been associated with this work are:—John H. Dillon (Chairman), James B. Shea, John Farquhar, Robert S. Peabody and Thomas E. Galvin.

fields, but these prospects were cut off by trees when pasturage was abandoned. The survey made in 1916 (see Plate I) shows the utter lack of relationship which has existed between the State House and the Common. The paths have led rather to the street intersection than to the State House, the openings between trees have revealed no satisfactory vistas, the arrangement of entrances has borne no relation to the steps of the Capitol, and the famous Brewer Fountain has stood for nearly half a century opposite the house of its donor rather than on the axis of the State House to which it obviously relates.

One feature alone on the Common has up to this time paid tribute to the State House, — a monument of the Civil War, the Shaw Memorial, which was erected twenty years ago. This was placed exactly on the true axis, though its front line is not at a right angle with that axis. The steps leading to the Common on each side of this memorial were only six feet wide and recalled the light foot-travel of a village rather than a great city. The Memorial is of unusual interest and great beauty.

A photograph taken in the winter of 1916-17 (see Plate IV) shows the eclipse of the State House by trees. One will readily understand from a study of this picture that strangers visiting the Common in the summer time frequently inquired the whereabouts of the Capitol and on catching a glimpse of its golden dome among the leaves, asked what route should be taken to reach it. The complexity of the path system which baffled these visitors is well shown by the survey and by the bird's eye photograph on Plate V.

The unsatisfactory approaches to the State House and the impossibility of seeing it from the Common, have always awakened comment, but not until the construction of the new wings was undertaken five years ago, were actual plans made for improvements on the Common. Public interest in the new wings of the building revived interest in the historic "Bullfinch Front" and encouraged the State to tear down many buildings along Beacon Street to reveal the new west wing and to display the entire facade more satisfactorily from this street. (See Plate III.) The house of the patriot, John Hancock, formerly stood on the site of one of the buildings shown in course of demolition in this photograph. A movement was started at the beginning of the present war to rebuild this historic mansion on its old lines, but the future of the project is still in doubt.

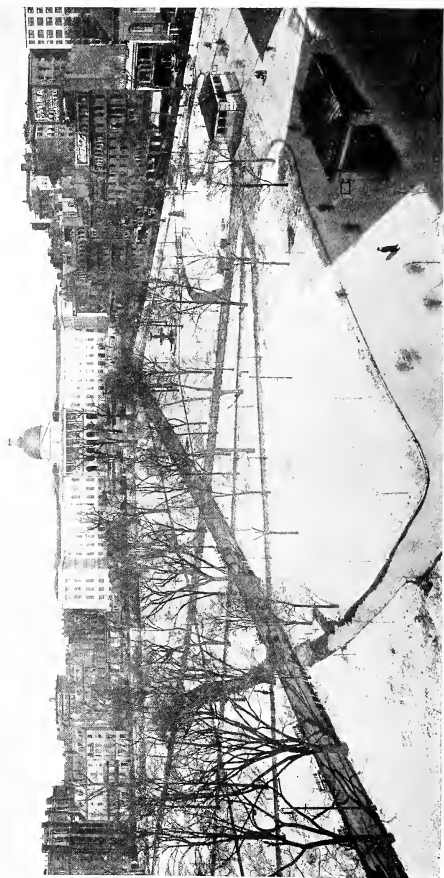


PLATE V. STATE HOUSE FROM TREMONT STREET BEFORE CONSTRUCTION OF MALL

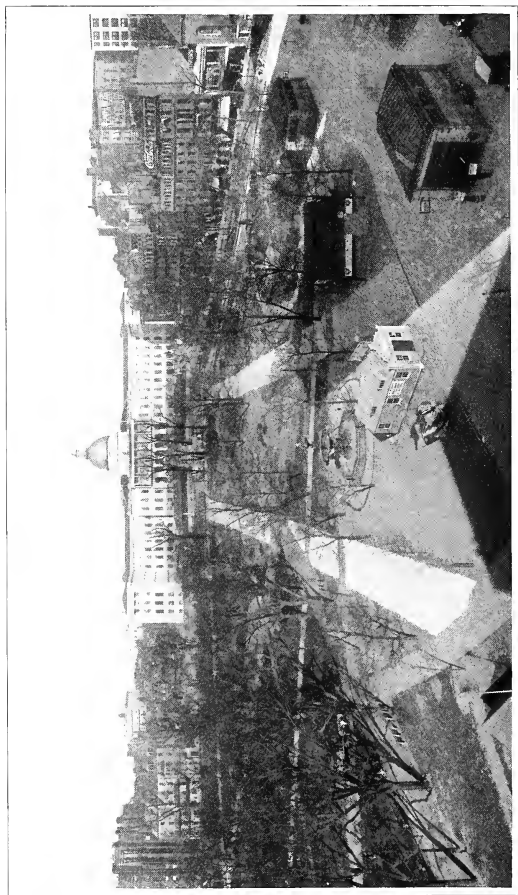


PLATE VI. STATE HOUSE FROM TREMONT STREET AFTER CONSTRUCTION OF MALL

The general plan of improvement which is shown on Plate II opposite the survey shows the program of improvements as they are being carried out. A glance at this plan and an examination of the bird's eye view of the ground showing the construction of the Mall clearly indicates the entire scheme and the degree to which it has been carried out. One is immediately struck on seeing the general plan of development, with the diagonal paths which cut across the new Mall. The need of eliminating some of these footways becomes apparent on seeing the work. It is generally believed that the public will be willing to permit these changes although the walks have been fixed by long use and are surrounded with historic associations. The elimination of some of these walks would make a valuable addition to the grass areas and would also stimulate the growth of trees, first by releasing loam space and second by permitting the ground to be cultivated. Maintenance costs would also be reduced if the up-keep of some of these unnecessary walks were eliminated. The Mall is known as the "Liberty Mall" and was dedicated by Mayor Curley during the past month in memory of the American Soldiers of the Great War.

The profiles of the side Malls are not regular. They are allowed to undulate slightly with the natural contour like the other walks of the Common in order to retain the general character of the old footways. These walks, moreover, are not exactly parallel, — they converge toward the State House. This arrangement was adopted in part to avoid large trees, in part to keep the lower end of the Mall in scale with the Brewer Fountain, and in part to increase the appearance of perspective in the Mall itself which is a little too short for the effect it attempts to secure.

The Brewer Fountain has been moved from its unfortunate eccentric position to an effective site at the foot of the hill-slope where it now lies on the axis of the Mall. It was placed as far south as the subway structure would permit, allowing sufficient room for the growth of the semi-circular arrangement of trees at the end of the vista. A partial closure of the lower end of the vista was arranged by trees in this manner in order to prevent the Mall from opening an unpleasant view of Tremont Street and its diagonal traffic lines as viewed from the State House. This closure also furnishes a proper background for the Brewer Fountain and provides agreeable shade in summer.

The steps on either side of the Shaw Memorial have been

widened from six feet to approximately 35 feet. There are occasions when the entire width of these new wide flights will be needed to accommodate crowds of people witnessing parades of troops in front of the State House or attending open air mass meetings on the Mall, but the main purpose of the widening is to bring these steps into scale with the great stairways of the State House and open spaces of the Common so that the State House grounds and the Common itself will form one composition. Heretofore the State House grounds have been cut off sharply from the Common by the fence along Beacon Street, by the Shaw Memorial itself and its narrow lateral stairway, as well as by the unrelated planting and slant-wise paths of the Common. Plate VII shows the appearance of the old stairways and also the secondary flight of eight-inch steps near at hand. The new stairways will absorb both these footways and it is proposed for the safety of foot-passers to abandon a third and still narrower stairway which connects Park Street with the end of Beacon Street Mall. These rearrangements will require foot-passers to make a slight detour and will prevent them from crossing Park Street at Beacon Street on long diagonals as heretofore. These diagonal crossings are exceedingly dangerous to life and limb and also interfere unnecessarily with the progress of motors.

One who has not lived in Boston or who is unacquainted with the feeling of fondness almost amounting to a superstition with which the trees on the Common are regarded by Bostonians, will hardly understand how closely the tree problem is united with the constructional improvements. It would have been impossible to proceed with the improvements in construction if the public had not been convinced that the new plantings were essential, that they were to be carried out with special care, that the greatest pains would be taken not to remove old trees, even in a decrepit condition, until the young trees had made a substantial growth, and until sufficient shade had been furnished to permit the dying trees to be removed without making a pronounced change in the landscape of the Common. Since the earliest days, the arrangement of walks on the Common has been an index of the system of tree planting. Trees have always been planted in parallel rows along the edges of the walks except those which cross the Parade Ground. This admirable system furnished shade for the footways and lends a peculiar character to the Common landscapes which is not to be



PLATE VII. NARROW STAIRWAYS TO BE REPLACED BY ONE BROAD STAIRWAY



PLATE VIII. SUBWAY ENTRANCES OF UNNECESSARY SIZE





PLATE IX. EUROPEAN SUBWAY ENTRANCE OF SMALL DIMENSIONS

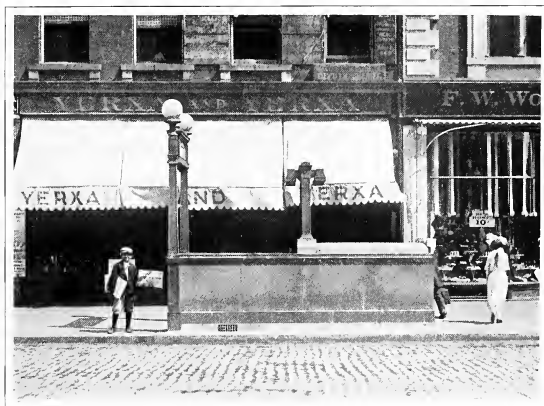


PLATE X. COMPACT SUBWAY ENTRANCE IN CAMBRIDGE

found in the naturalistic open spaces of the Park System as a whole. Irregular grove planting or specimen tree plantings of the English Deer Park type has never been practiced on the Common except in the groups of short-lived poplars which were set out a decade or two ago near the southerly end of the ball-field. These irregular clumps recall a public garden and are out of place on the Common where traditions have excluded naturalistic plantings of all kinds embracing flower beds and even shrubbery except in the old burying ground. To preserve the individuality of the Common, these traditions are to be adhered to and the new plantations are to follow the walks in parallel rows as in the olden days. At the present time, the old rows of trees with broken ranks consist to a large extent of decrepit specimens which have been dying limb by limb for the last twenty years. Time was when the long branches of these trees were laden with foliage to the ends, but the Leopard moth, the Elm Leaf Beetle, and impoverished soil, have made them bare and the saw of the tree surgeon has, by necessity, followed this work nearly to its conclusion. Hundreds of old dying trees carrying decapitated branches from which tufts of sprout foliage have started out, are seen on every hand. Fortunately there are also hundreds of middle age and young trees which are growing thriftily and are responding to the soil improvement operations which have been carried out during the last few years.

The experience of the past has taught that trees may be planted reasonably close in the rows, provided the rows of adjoining paths are not too near one another, and provided the trees themselves are not of a widely spreading habit. Spindling trees dying from overcrowding may be counted by scores where the path systems converge at sharply acute angles, as for example, in the Winter Street—Joy Street regions and between West Street and the Frog Pond. When new trees are planted in these districts, they should be so spaced to give room for thrifty branch growth and for ample light for intervening grass sectors. On the other hand, experience has also shown that trees may be planted very near together on the roof of the subway where shallow soil and poor drainage will not permit wide spreading branches to develop and where the long life is out of the question.

The distance between the top of the subway roof and the surface of the walks varies from a few inches to two or three feet. At best, the new loam spaces cannot contain more than

from two to two and one-half feet of soil. These pockets of loam are to be drained at the bottom to prevent the souring of the soil. Undoubtedly a good growth of grass can be secured if reasonable water is provided in seasons of drought, and it will be feasible to grow small sized trees. These trees are to be set near together to give proper shade. The Columnar English Elm has proven much more long-lived on the Common than the spreading American Elm. The small-leaved Linden has also held its own against crowding, insect ravages, diseases, shallow soil, and city dust with special success.

The broken ranks of the dying trees are to be filled, tree by tree, as sunlight enters following the demise of old trees. The fondness which the citizens of Boston cherish for the old trees of the Common is so deep that a policy of felling the old trees cannot be applied. Until the young trees have made sufficient headway to show that they can be depended upon to take the place of the dying specimens, the latter must be allowed to stand, unless they are infested with borers and diseases which threaten the life of vigorous trees.

The subway stations, see Plate VIII, which now stand on the Common were built in the early days of subway development, and they reflect the feeling of that period that this type of structure should be monumental in size. These entrances are so large that they interfere with vistas across the Common and the store-keepers on Tremont street complain of them because they prevent foot-passers on the Malls from seeing Tremont Street stores' windows. In Paris, subway stations built at about the same period as those on the Common show the prevailing preference of those days for superstructures of a size wholly out of scale with the actual requirements for headroom. That the subway structures on Boston Common should be reduced in size according to modern design, is now generally agreed. Without diminishing the capacity of these entrances, it would be simple to cut down the height of the side walls. The design shown in Plate IX has been suggested for this purpose with the omission of the tall standards and sign which would be unnecessary. The objection to this entrance in the climate of Boston is the difficulty of keeping it free from snow in the winter. The Boston Common Society has had designs prepared with solid sides approximately four feet in height, surmounted with a glass snow-roof to be attached in the winter and removed in the summer. Plate X,



PLATE XI. "DESERT OF SAHARA" AT CORNER OF PARK AND TREMONT STREETS

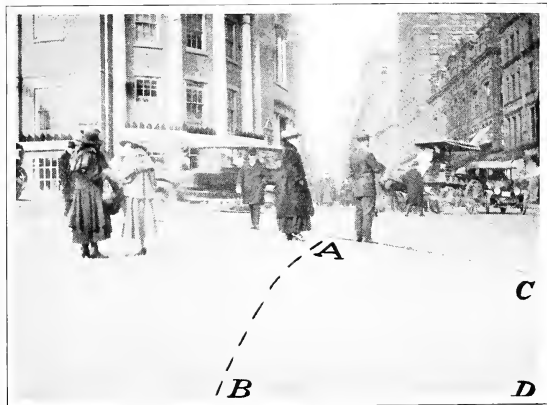


PLATE XII. PROPOSED LOCATION OF TREES AND GRASS AT PARK STREET CORNER

of the subway station in Cambridgeport built by the Boston Transit Commission shows a step in this direction. This structure resembles the companionway of a boat and reduces to a minimum the amount of masonry and iron work required above the ground level. The side walls are made solid not only to keep out snow, but to prevent mud and water from being splashed into the openings by the wheels of passing automobiles, as well as to keep dust from blowing in from the surfaces of the street and sidewalk. Preliminary sketches for the new subway structures have been prepared by William D. Austin. The cost of construction is to be borne by the City as these superstructures affect the landscape of the Common and nearby streets rather than the operation of the subways. With the growth of the Rapid Transit system of Boston, further changes are likely to be made in the position of subway entrances, and consequently it has seemed undesirable on the whole to arrange a combined subway station as a monumental feature on the Common to harmonize with an axial approach to the State House. The modern tendency is rather to scatter these stairways and in that way to prevent the formation of crowds at a single point.

Plate XI shows the wide expanse of granolithic surface at the lower end of the Mall along Tremont Street. In the summer these open spaces become baking hot under the heat of the sun, and they also invite pedestrians to make diagonal crossings of Tremont Street. It is proposed to reduce the areas of these granolithic deserts by the addition of planting beds as shown on the plan. These areas will extend to the curb line and will provide openings for foot-passers only at points where street crossings are desirable. Plate XII shows by the letters A, B, C, and D, the proposed outlines of one of these new planting spaces. When this loam bed is built and provided with curbing, foot-passers will no longer be tempted to make diagonal crossings at the Tremont Street—Park Street junction but will find the shorter and safer upper crossing more convenient. These changes will, at the same time, increase the facility with which motor vehicles can be controlled by the traffic officers. The photographs show many small buildings and tents at the foot of the Mall near the southern end. These temporary structures are used for war-time recruiting stations and shelters.





